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ABSTRACT

The Trainable Workshop is a vocational training program for secondary level trainable mentally handicapped students in a rural public school setting. The key component to the program is the development of students' sense of worthiness through accomplishment. The supervisor's role is to manipulate the workshop environment to reinforce and develop students' progress toward marketable skills in a work setting. Verbal reinforcement and tokens are used as rewards, while time-out is used as punishment. Other components of the program include a series of checklists to determine students' performance levels, individual educational plans, weekly goals, and placement into community work sites. (SW)

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A VOCATIONAL PROGRAM FOR THE TRAINABLE MENTALLY HANDICAPPED IN A RURAL SETTING

ABSTRACT

The Trainable Workshop, where students spend half of every school day, develops self-esteem and responsibility be teaching work habits and skills through productivity. Students thrive when they can be constructive and produce with their hands. A structured, positive reinforcement system breeds motivation and pride in their work. Some students are mainstreamed (vocationally), while others work in community work sites. Many take part in a paid summer work program in the community.

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Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the Council for Exceptional Children (62nd, Washington, DC, April 23-27, 1984)

A Vocational Program For The Trainable Mentally Handicapped In A Rural Setting

Being part of a good program developing vocational skills in the trainable mentally handicapped is a terrific experience. The results are never limited just to vocational work habits and skills, but mushroom to almost every aspect of the personality of the individual. Students develop dignity and self worth through hands-on production and this can't help but affect their learning, maturation, and improvement in all other areas. Behavior problems are much more easily managed, if not quickly eliminated, within such a program. The mentally handicapped have much to contribute as an integral work force in our society and we have hardly begun to realistically accommodate them.

This author has developed such a vocational training program for secondary trainable students in the public school setting. It is called "The Trainable Workshop". Its central aim is to develop better, more competitive employees of students before they leave school, so as to be more successful in a job setting after graduation. All the other previously mentioned benefits to the individual are just tremendous extras.

The key to the program is in making students feel "successful" on whatever level they enter the program. This does tremendous things to students self-confidence, thereby immediately enhancing future learning and progress. Based on behavior modification principles, the program emphasizes achievements and not deficiencies.

Located in a vocational building essentially for regular high school students, The Trainable Workshop is a complementary arm of the trainable classroom. It is managed by a teacher assistant, although it is designed and overseen by the teacher. All trainable students from ages 14 to 21 take part in this program. Although students are scheduled to spend half of each school day in the Workshop, it is

treated as a privilege and only when students follow the program's behavioral guidelines are they allowed to participate (which happens to be almost all the time).

The Trainable Workshop is a very structured program involving regular staff meetings (those directly involved), long range goal planning (IEP's), weekly and daily job planning, and record-keeping of skills and behaviors.

Planning and paperwork are good support systems if done efficiently, but the critical influence on students is the daily on-site experiences and interactions of those involved. Perhaps the following perspectives will help one see the Workshop as a working system:

The Trainable Workshop: From the Student's Point of View

The Trainable Workshop serves as an integral part of a program which develops a sense of worthiness through accomplishment, in the student's self-concept. Often lacking some abstracting ability, students easily latch onto hands-on, productive jobs which they can feel successful at. This feeling of success is enhanced by a strong, consistent, positive reinforcement system where students receive "rewards" (social and tangible) for good and productive behavior. Also important, students are regularly assigned jobs which challenge and enhance their capabilities in a work setting, with individualized support and instruction when needed. In summation, students in The Trainable Workshop should feel accomplishment on three levels:

1) satisfaction from being productive on a consistent basis;

2) satisfaction from responsibility of working independently with consistency;

3) satisfaction from regular self-improvement of work skills as they become proficient on more jobs.

The Trainable Workshop: From the Workshop Supervisor's Point of View

The role of the supervisor in The Trainable Workshop is to manipulate the workshop environment so as to reinforce and develop students' progress toward marketable skills in a work setting. This progress not only includes work habits and skills, but also a social-emotional approach to work involving "Work Ethic" pride and determination. The supervisor should set a "business" atmosphere and portray the Workshop as a serious place of production.

Students are expected to punch in (time clock) upon entering and are then assigned a job. In assigning jobs, clear instructions or demonstrations should be given and the importance of productivity stressed to the student. Correctly completed jobs should never be undone in the presence of the student. As much as possible, job assignments should be planned ahead of time. They should take into consideration where each student stands on the behaviorally stated checklists for different areas of development. Some job assignments may focus on work habits (ie. job completion), others on skills, or both. Lower functioning students tend to be assigned to a larger number of jobs in a half-day due to attention span and the nature of the jobs.

The positive reinforcement given to students is the most important factor for student progress in the workhop. "Rewards" have a tremendous impact on students' work thereafter, especially if they are structured and consistent. The supervisor should regularly give verbal reinforcement to working students ("good job", "fantastic", "great sanding", etc.), taking a sincere interest in what they're doing and giving particular attention to weaker areas ("I like the way you're working and not talking", "Good being careful with tools"). Tokens (three per half-day) should be given out at regular intervals (provided student has followed rules and not been in

time-out) and should be accompanied by a verbal reinforcer. At a later time students turn in tokens to the classroom teacher and get marked for three tokens in the respective place on their Work Record Card. Four tokens are occasionally given for especially good work/or progress. For long range reinforcement, students are given a check each week reflecting their production for the previous week. Students sign and cash them with the teacher for cash-in-hand and spend their money during "payday" time, when a food store is set up for that purpose. All positive reinforcement is regular and consistent.

The "time-out" area is a place where students are asked to sit when they do not cooperate or are not polite. It is not punishment. It is based on the principle that if students don't behave appropriately, they don't "deserve" to be in the Workshop (withdrawal of privilege). Students are always given the choice of either following the rules with the rest of the class, or doing nothing in "time-out". The "time-out" area helps to reduce any emotional conflict between teacher and student. If a particular student is repeatedly uncooperative or impolite within a short period of time, then he/she does not "deserve" to be in the Workshop vicinity (treated as a privilege) and is then asked to go to the classroom.

COMPETENCY BASED CHECKLISTS

A series of checklists were developed in order to reflect individual levels of functioning for students, yet be a concise, efficient tool for the workshop supervisor. As much as possible, checklist items are listed sequentially from easiest to hardest. Although always under scrutiny and revision, the checklist areas at present are *Work Habits*, *Work Activity/Evaluation*, *Safety/Personal Welfare*, *Paper Handling*, *Tool Identification*, *Tool Use*, *Woodworking*, *Furniture Restoration*, *Assembly/Disassembly* and *Custodial Maintenance*. The philosophy adhered to in developing

and revising checklists is to develop student work habits and skills in as many different areas as possible, yet concentrating on those that will directly facilitate employment potential.

Individual students are represented in columns to the right of the behavioral objectives on each checklist. This way, the workshop supervisor can, at a glance, see the performance levels of the group in any particular checklist area. Criterion for recording a student's competency is when he/she can perform that specific objective four out of five times, recorded on the checklist as "4/5". Exceptions are on specific objectives in areas such as *Safety/Personal Welfare* and *Work Habits* where four out of five times is not sufficient enough.

GOALS AND PLANNING

Both Individual Education Plans (IEP's) and the Workshop checklists are used in developing weekly goals for each student. The teacher and teacher assistant (workshop supervisor) meet weekly to develop and revise these goals and daily job assignments are then planned accordingly.

A code system for planning eliminates excessive writing and space problems. Each checklist is abbreviated (ie. Tool Use = TU) and, of course, objectives are numbered on each checklist. This way a student who needs work on using, for example, an adjustable wrench can be listed with his weekly goals as TU-7. Specific job assignments and materials are abbreviated also. Using this method, weekly goals and job planning for an entire week fit on one 8½" x 14" planning sheet designed for this purpose. These concise, weekly sheets can then be easily used for future reference.

Weekly meetings also discuss general concerns and specific student behaviors. Two full-time volunteers take part and give input, as well as receive direction on handling students in a positive, constructive fashion.

TIME CARDS AND COMPENSATION

As previously mentioned, part of this program's reinforcement system involves payment to students for their production in the Trainable Workshop. This is a very important part of the program as it simulates a "real" work situation and the renumeration they will receive from it. Relatively, it is a token amount, but most students are just beginning to learn the meaning and value of money, and respond well.

Each day, as students enter the Workshop they "punch in" at the time clock and give their card to the workshop supervisor who assigns them their job and writes the "job code" in the respective space on the time card. When a student changes jobs, he/she punches out and in again and the supervisor records on the card the number of "units" completed (previous job) and writes down the new job code.

At the end of the week, a tally sheet is used to record jobs and tally production and respective paycheck amount for each student (listed in columns).

WORK EXPERIENCE

As is often the case in special education, learning situations are presented in small increments of difficulty so that students can more easily step up to higher-functioning learning. Vocational training is an important area to use such progression, and the Trainable Workshop functions as a basal training ground and home-base for progressive vocational training situations for students.

Rarely, if ever, are new students ready for any kind of independent work experience. However, in time, students can be seen to develop attention skills, consistency, and responsibility and are assigned semi-independent work routines nearby the Workshop or in another part of the building. It's exciting to see moderately and severely retarded students develop into very responsible individuals. The next "step" may be mainstreaming to one of the Multi-Occupations

programs (initially one or two half-days per week, then expanding).

Our Work Experience Coordinator, dealing with special education only, could then assist us with further placements. Next might be assignment to one of three non-profit work sites (we still pay students internally) in the community, where students walk (usually in pairs) two half-days per week. Another option is a work placement where, through the Work Experience program, students get paid $.80 to $1.25 per hour at approved work sites. From there, more competitive work placements can be arranged in private business and public agencies where students can get paid minimum wage for competitive-quality work. These placements are greatly assisted by a terrific counselor from the New York State Office of Vocational Rehabilitation (OVR) who is specifically assigned to the special education programs in our area.

In the summer, trainable students work for the Chamber of Commerce maintaining local parks and other public places. This program is operated through OVR with wages funded through CETA.

Students do very well in this program. Support from many directions has enhanced the program's development. Administration, parents, other programs, volunteers, service clubs, other agencies, and the community as a whole have been receptive and supportive of our many projects.

Vocational training is a tremendous way to give meaning and dignity to a trainable mentally handicapped young person. That feeling of being successful in a hands-on, productive sense does wonders to one's total personality.

We, as professionals, must join hands with parents, service agencies, employers and average citizens of our society to offer dignity and realistic avenues for their vocational potential. We've only begun to see what they can do.